
Dependence in / on TV series II (Séries et dépendance: Dépendance aux séries II)

Anne Sweet

**Electronic version**

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/inmedia/880>

DOI: 10.4000/inmedia.880

ISSN: 2259-4728

Publisher

Center for Research on the English-Speaking World (CREW)

Electronic reference

Anne Sweet, « Dependence in / on TV series II (Séries et dépendance: Dépendance aux séries II) », *InMedia* [Online], 6 | 2017, Online since 18 December 2017, connection on 24 September 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/inmedia/880> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/inmedia.880>

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- 1 Are TV series a sort of drug? Do series—which have become increasingly absorbing and immersive, and which are often greedily overconsumed in large episode batches of “binge-watching”—create “addicts”? Series are an intense source of pleasure for many—so can watching them really be harmful? If so, what are the repercussions on people’s personal and professional lives, and their physical and mental health? What are the signs and symptoms of media addiction? And how do media producers deploy strategies to seduce and manipulate media consumers? In what ways do new technologies like streaming services promote binge-watching and compulsive consumption? These are a few of the questions that the international interdisciplinary conference, “Séries et dépendance/Dépendance aux séries II: Prolongements diachroniques, psychologiques, psychiatriques et esthétiques” (“Series and Dependence/Dependence in/on TV series II: The diachronic, psychological, psychiatric and aesthetic extensions of TV series dependence”), tried to answer. It took place on December 9 and 10, 2016, at Paris Nanterre University in France, and featured talks in French and English by scholars in the social sciences and the humanities, as well as by health professionals.
- 2 “Dependence in/on TV series II” is part of a series, of which the first installment, “Dépendance aux séries I” (“Dependence in / on TV series I”), was held a few months earlier on February 5 and 6, 2016.¹ Both were organized by the same group of professors: psychologists Nathalie Camart and Lucia Romo-Desprez (both from Paris Nanterre University), and media studies experts Anne-Marie Paquet-Deyris and Sébastien Lefait (from Paris Nanterre University and the University of Paris 8 respectively).
- 3 While the question of TV addiction is not a new one,² media have become more interactive and immersive, and the conference highlights the importance of

ascertaining the possible consequences related to new ways in which viewers engage with series, for example through “binge-watching” and transmediality. The use of the term “binge-watching” conjures up other compulsive behaviors with addictive components like “binge-drinking” or “binge-eating.” “Once you pop, you just can’t stop”—as the old Pringles potato chip slogan goes, and both installments of “Dependence in/on TV Series” are predicated on the idea articulated by Carlton Cruise, executive producer of *Lost* (ABC, 2004-2010), that a TV series can be as addictive as potato chips and that TV producers do their utmost to make them so.³ His quote about this, which is reproduced on the brochures for both conferences, underlines his ideas thus: “It’s like the people who make potato chips. They know how to put the right chemicals in there to make you want to eat the next potato chip. Our goal is to make you want to watch that next episode.”⁴ Thus, both conferences start with the hypothesis that—just like chips—series are created to be so desirable—even addictive—that viewers “can’t stop,” are insatiably ravenous for more, and can even be so overcome by their hunger to consume that they gorge themselves, with potentially dire consequences for their health and happiness.

- 4 The second conference expands upon ideas of the first, that the social and health issues pertaining to series’ overconsumption—and the production strategies that foster and encourage it—were the main axes along which experts from different fields, including media studies and psychology, examined the issue of series addiction. Using these ideas as a starting point, and featuring some of the same speakers, the second installment delves deeper into the roots of series addiction and emphasizes its possible cognitive effects. It also examines secondary addictions across other media, and the ways in which series consumers are further pulled into the immersive world of TV series through transmedia
- 5 In keeping with the conference’s objectives to study TV series addiction from a multi-dimensional angle, the keynote speakers analyzed the issue from both the perspective of the media consumer and the media producer. The first was Dr. Philippe Batel, a doctor who treats patients with addiction issues. His talk “Séries et dépendance? Le point de vue d'un psychiatre addictologue” (“Series and dependence? The Perspective of a Psychiatrist Specializing in Addiction?”), set the tone for the importance of understanding series consumption as a medical and social issue. The second, Dodine Grimaldi, a screenwriter, gave a talk on “Manipulations scénaristiques pour addiction programmée” (“Narrative Manipulations for Scheduled Addiction,” which set the tone for study on how series creators purposefully attempt to trigger and maintain viewer engagement.
- 6 Shoring up the conference’s interdisciplinary perspective, researchers gave talks on various aspects related to the ways viewers engage with series. For example, Psychology Professors Nathalie Camart, Rafika Zebdi, and Cyrille Bouvet (Paris Nanterre University) gave a joint talk, “Psychologie des sériephiles: étude empirique menée auprès de 400 sujets” (“Psychology of Series’ Fans: an Empirical Study of 400 People”), which examined the behavior of series viewers. Also examining series addiction from a health perspective were Elizabeth Rossé, a psychologist at Marmottan Hospital, with her talk “Et si l'addiction aux séries n'existait pas?” (“What If TV Series Addiction Didn’t Exist?”), and Psychology professors Lucia Romo, Hélène Riazuelo, and Natalie Rigal (Paris Nanterre University), with their group presentation, “Regards croisés: le fil de la série télévisée” (“Converging Views: the Common Thread of TV

series”). From the media studies perspective, Anne-Marie Paquet-Deyris discussed issues of addiction in relation to the recent British series *Whitechapel* (ITV, 2009-2013) in her speech entitled, “*Whitechapel*: how to become addicted to violence and crimes from the Past [sic].” Sébastien Lefait (University of Paris 8) analyzed the depiction of addiction in series, notably the drug-addict character Sherlock in the recent BBC1 series of the same name (2010-2017), and the interactivity of viewers with series through transmedia in his talk, “Hyperperception du personnage et hyperactivité spectatorielle: les paradoxes de la dépendance à l'écran” (“Character Hyperperception and Spectatorial Hyperactivity: the Paradoxes of Screen Dependency”). The speech by Alexis Pichard (Le Havre University), “Élaboration et expansion(s) d'un piège addictif télévisuel: Le cas de la série *24 heures chrono*” (“Elaboration and Expansion of an Addictive Narrative Trap: The Case of *24*”), analyzed how and why viewers had been motivated to watch an entire season of *24* (Fox 2001-2014) over a full day to mimic the episode structure of the series.

- 7 TV series addiction is a phenomenon that is still in the process of being scientifically defined and substantiated, and thus the talks presented at “Dependence in/on TV series II” were important in continuing the dialog and furthering research on this subject. In underlining the irrefutably addictive properties of TV programs, which are ever more present and distributed on various media platforms, researchers at the “Dependence in/on TV series II” also gave important evidence to advance the definition and understanding of media addiction in a larger sense. The increasing transmediality of immersive interactive media products that allow people to remain continuously connected to their preferred series or fictional world are sure to continue to profoundly engage media consumers cognitively and mentally as technology and production strategies become more sophisticated. The study of the potential impact of these phenomena is thus more imperative than ever, and a third installment of the conference is tentatively planned.

ENDNOTES

1. An official Youtube video created by PhD student Dalia Saleh (Paris Nanterre University), who assisted in the conference organization, and an interview in the French newspaper *Libération* with Nathalie Camart, one of its principal organizers, were published after this event. See, Clémentine Mercier, “Interview: Nathalie Camart: ‘Le concept de dépendance aux séries n’est pas scientifiquement validé’”, *Libération*, February 12, 2016. Accessed February 2, 2017.
2. See, for example, a review of TV addiction literature in Robin Smith, “Television Addiction,” in *Perspectives on Media Effects*, eds. Jennings Bryant and Dolf Zillmann (Hillsdale: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates: 1986), 109-128.
3. See also, Hannah Osborne, “Once You Pop You Really Can’t Stop: Crisps are Addictive, Scientists Say”, *International Business Times*, April 12, 2013. Accessed February 2, 2017.
4. See official conference web site. Accessed February 2, 2017.